

The National Park Service Role in American Education
(Adapted from the National Park Service Strategic Plan)

As early as 1906, Congress in the Antiquities Act recognized the government's role of using public lands to increase public knowledge. The National Park Service's first director, Stephen T. Mather, believed that *one of the chief functions of national parks and monuments is to serve educational purposes.*

The Historic Sites Act of 1935 explicitly directed the National Park Service (NPS) to *develop an educational program and service.* The National Park System has been called the nation's greatest university without walls. While the National Park Service has long recognized its educational role, education is now receiving increased prominence. The National Park Service has an obligation to the American people to share its natural laboratories and historic objects – to use its parks as classrooms. Helping people understand the complexity of the land and its history will support the fundamental mission of the National Park Service and increase support for the preservation of the mission.

Improving the National Park Service's educational success requires a changed attitude, one that is mindful of the educational importance of parks and their resources to our citizens and their everyday lives. A changed attitude also means increased outreach and interaction with educational institutions at all levels, broadening the intellectual enrichment of all. Such greater interaction, already begun, must include strong relationships with academia at individual parks as well as service-wide. Textbook publishers and educators who develop classroom curricula can also use these authentic resources to teach about our rich national heritage. Using current and emerging technology can bring knowledge and appreciation of NPS resources to millions of Americans, whether they visit parks or only learn about parks through the media. Working with video and broadcasting to improve the quality of programs about parks will also extend the national preservation and environmental ethic.

In addition, the National Park Service must reach out to communities across the nation as a partner in education. Using the lessons learned in our parks, the National Park Service must engage with others who wish to share with the public the knowledge and excitement of these natural and cultural places. Parks are not isolated islands, they are a small part of the larger ecosystem and only a part of American history. National Park Service educational efforts must reflect this interconnection by participating in the regional efforts of other educators.

For many years the National Park Service emphasized visitor interpretation rather than education, with information and entertainment sometimes being considered more important than learning. In actuality, interpretation both overlaps and complements more formal and intensive education. Having an integrated, professional, quality

educational program sponsored by the National Park Service that is accessible and exciting to its participants and which functions at the different levels of knowledge and interests that participants and visitors bring will always be a challenge. The resources themselves, the knowledge about them and the ability to communicate with the public through appropriate techniques are all critical elements in any National Park Service educational approach. In reality, National Park Service employees are teachers – teachers in special places where tangible resources help visitors understand the intangible ideas that the resources represent.